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ABSTRACT

This guide is intended to help principals, department chairs, teachers, and other educators who are chairing a mixed gender work group. The first section discusses research-identified differences between the way men and women communicate (both verbally and nonverbally) in groups. A 23-item gender communications assessment, which is designed to assess the extent to which the men and women in a particular group are communicating (both verbally and nonverbally) is provided in the next section. The next section contains 13 strategies for reducing verbal communication barriers, 3 for reducing nonverbal communication barriers, and 4 for reducing both verbal and nonverbal communication barriers. Six situations that group leaders may encounter in mixed gender work groups and sample responses to the situation are discussed next. Also provided is a bibliography of research on sex differences in communications, curriculum materials on sex differences in communication for students from the upper elementary grades through college, and group process and development literature focusing on making groups function more effectively. (MN)

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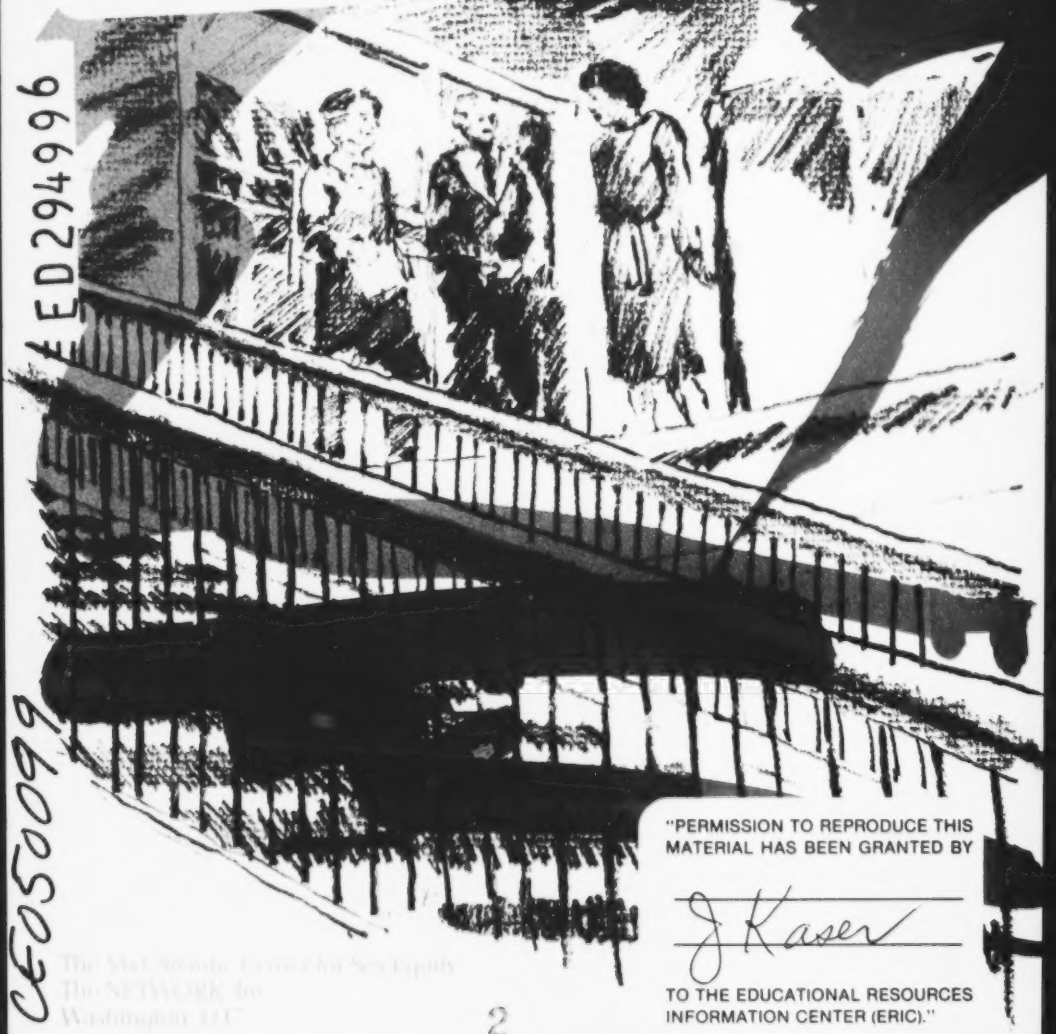

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COUNT ME IN!

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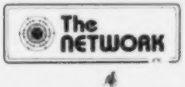

If you are a principal, department chair, teacher or other educator who has ever chaired a group, you have undoubtedly struggled with some common problems:

- How do you encourage people who do not talk to do so?
- For those that do not talk, how do you interpret their silence?
- What do you say to people who talk too much or to those who interrupt?
- What do you say publicly and when do you talk privately to persons about their behavior in a group?

So Who's Been Excluded?

Research studies over the past decade have shown that some of these problems are gender related. Differences in communication have become more apparent as women have moved into formerly male domains in business, industry and education. Although there are still exceptions, work groups are increasingly made up of both women and men. That is especially true in public education where women now constitute 25 percent of the administrative and supervisory positions, a figure which is starting to increase after declining for nearly 50 years.[1] Moreover, women still make up the majority (67 percent), of teaching staffs.[2]

The research on communication patterns in mixed gender work groups shows that traditional behavior of men and women may restrict the richness of discussion and limit the productivity of the group. Moreover, some patterns convey negative attitudes that lead to distrust and even hostility. These dynamics are often so subtle that group members may not be aware of what is happening.

Although these behaviors may be linked to biological sex, that is not always the case. Recent research indicates that psychological sex may sometimes be the most important variable. Either men or women can be categorized as having a sex role orientation that is traditionally masculine, traditionally feminine, androgynous or undifferentiated. (An androgynous person selects from both traditionally female and male behaviors while an undifferentiated person rejects both.) Some communication behaviors (level of self-disclosure, for example), may be linked more closely to increasing or decreasing levels of femininity or masculinity than with biological sex per se.[3]

Regardless of whether the communication difference is related to biological sex or psychological sex, many of these differences negatively affect the way a group functions. Here's a partial listing of these differences:[4]

- Men are more likely to control discussion through introducing topics, interrupting and, in general, talking more than women.
- Women talk less, often assume supportive rather than leadership roles in conversation and, overall, receive less attention for their ideas from the group.

[1]E. Jones and X. Montenegro, Recent Trends in the Representation of Women and Minorities in School Administration and Problems of Documentation (Arlington, Virginia: American Association of School Administrators, 1982), pp.17-21.

[2]W. Vance Grant and Leo J. Eiden, Digest of Education Statistics (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 1982), p. 52.

[3]Judy C. Pearson, Gender and Communication (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown Publishers, 1985), pp. 51-54.

[4]Myra Sadker, David Sadker and Joyce Kaser, The Communications Gender Gap (Washington, D.C.: The Mid-Atlantic Center for Sex Equity), pp. 4-10.

Either women or men may use exclusionary language that reinforces sex stereotypes and that others in the group (men or women) find offensive.

Both men and women may expect group members to follow sex stereotypic roles that can limit each individual's contributions (for example, always selecting a man as leader or always having a woman take notes).

Women may exhibit verbal or non-verbal behavior characteristic of submissiveness (twirling their hair or using self put-downs) while men communicate with words and actions in ways that restrict and control a group (treating a woman with a good idea like an anomaly or touching women in a way that can be perceived as sexual or condescending).

Men and women may sit separately, thereby limiting cross-gender interaction.

Men's nonverbal behavior (eye contact, touching, gestures) may convey messages of dominance while women's nonverbal behavior (smiling, eye contact, deference) may reflect a lack of self-confidence and power.

Men may overemphasize women's physical appearance, ignoring or downplaying professional competencies; and women may do the same thing to themselves, thereby perpetuating sex role expectations.

What happens in any group is affected by factors other than gender and sex role orientation. Leaders need to be concerned with motivation, group development, conflict, personal agendas, decision making and other group task and maintenance functions. However, since there is an extensive body of literature on these aspects of group dynamics, this pamphlet focuses only on gender issues, that which the literature has not fully explored.

As a leader of educational groups, you want to get the most from your meetings. To help you do so, here is a checklist of behaviors often exhibited by women and by men that limit their ability to communicate in groups. It will help you know what behaviors to look for. These are *possible* behaviors; no group will exhibit this full range of exclusionary and inhibiting words and actions. Also, a single incident may not be significant (for example, a woman serving as group secretary on a given day). It's the repeated incidents, such as men constantly interrupting women, that you need to be concerned about. You will have to make some subjective judgments about what behaviors are inhibiting the interaction within your group. However, in most mixed gender groups you will see enough of these behaviors to know that they are limiting the free exchange of ideas and ultimately the quality and quantity of your group's work.

If you know what behaviors are holding back your group, then you can decide what steps to take. Following the assessment are some specific suggestions and strategies for what you can do or say in your group to facilitate interaction and when and how you might speak to group members privately.

Whatever the group – administrators, teachers, community members, parents or students – those in leadership roles want to make sure that both women and men participate and make the contributions they are fully capable of making. Who knows? A person who remains silent may have the idea that saves your school district $50,000, launches a new program, streamlines the transportation system or increases students' achievement scores. Don't let such potential go untapped when you may have the ability to release it.

Who's Being Excluded Now?

To what extent are women and men communicating in a way that enables your group to be fully productive? This assessment identifies verbal and non-verbal behaviors that can inhibit group functioning and productivity. This is designed to be used by an observer who would meet with your group over time. That person would record the behavior of the group members in order to answer the questions as well as to supply substantiating data.

If no such person is available, you can observe group members over time or have the group monitor its own behavior. Because of the large number of items, any observer needs to focus on a limited number at any one time, for example, only those related to non-verbal behavior. Note that the assessment form enables you to designate the degree to which a communication barrier exists. Also, you can strengthen your assessment by including specific examples for each item and/or frequency percentages to support your evaluation. To obtain a frequency percentage, count, for example, the number of times men and women introduce a new idea and then determine percentages based on the number of women and men in the group. You can assess some behaviors in a single meeting; others require observation over time. Also, for behaviors that both men and women exhibit, you may want to look further to sex role orientation to see if that is a contributing factor.

In your group, to what extent do women and men:	Frequently	Sometimes	Seldom	Frequently	Sometimes	Seldom
1. Talk more than their fair share of the time?						
2. Interrupt other speakers?						
3. Use the following in their language:						
A. The generic *he, his* and *man* to refer to both females and males?						
B. Gender specific terms such as *mailman, chairman, female doctor* or *male nurse*?						
C. Non-parallel terms such as *Marie* for a woman and *Dr. Rogers* for a man?						
D. Overly polite speech (e.g., excessive use of *excuse me* or *I'm sorry*)?						
E. Self-deprecating remarks such as *I don't think this is right, but…?*						
F. Tentative language (e.g., *maybe* or *probably*) or tag questions *(This is a good report, isn't it?)*?						
G. Apologies to women (but not men) for inappropriate use of language?						
H. Jokes in which members of one sex are the brunt of humor?						
I. Derogatory terms such as *gal, my girl* or *broad* for adult females or *male chauvinist pig* for insensitive or unaware men?						
4. Introduce new topics?						
5. Support and extend discussion topics introduced by others, especially those of the opposite sex?						
6. Talk about topics that others in the group know little about, aren't interested in and are irrelevant to the discussion?						

	Women			Men		
	Frequently	Sometimes	Seldom	Frequently	Sometimes	Seldom
7. Answer questions addressed to other group members, especially those of the opposite sex?						
8. Verbally defer to others, especially those of the opposite sex?						
9. Disclose personal information about themselves in the group (information which reflects and reinforces their lower status or lack of power)?						
10. Regularly get coffee or take notes?						
11. When challenged, use noncommunicative *uh-huhs* and short statements to defend their positions rather than forceful, detailed, substantiated arguments?						
12. Make inappropriate comments (positive or negative) about the physical appearance of a group member of the opposite sex?						
13. Use any type of humor?						
14. Use humor excessively or inappropriately?						
15. Verbally spar with one another for group leadership?						
Nonverbal Behavior						
16. Separate themselves by sex?						
17. Avoid eye contact, tilt their heads, twirl their hair or exhibit other forms of submissive behavior?						
18. Touch others in a way that's perceived as either sexual or condescending?						
19. Smile at times when smiling isn't appropriate?						
20. Avoid looking at speakers of one sex?						
21. Pay more attention to speakers of one sex?						
22. Carry a lot of baggage (purse, briefcase, bookbag, brown bag lunch) with them?						
23. Take up an inappropriate share of space or select the most desirable space for themselves?						

How Can Everyone Be Counted In?

Data from the assessment form will give you specific information as to the behaviors that are inhibiting the efficiency and effectiveness of your group. Your next step is to decide what you can do to remove or reduce these communication barriers. Here are 20 suggestions for improving equitable participation in your group – things you can do or say while your meeting is going on.

Strategies for Reducing Verbal Communication Barriers

1. Set the standards for and use the language you want group members to use. For example,
   A. Call the person heading up your group the *chair* or other non-sexist term (*facilitator, leader* or *advisor*).

   B. Be consistent in referring to *all* group members by either their first names or by a more formal means of address.

   C. Set the standard for gender inclusive language by using plural pronouns and adjectives or by alternating *he/she* and *her/his*. (For example, "All members must turn in their reports by Friday," or "Each member must turn in his or her report....")

   D. If a group member uses a sexist term (e.g., *chairman*), at the first opportune moment use the non-sexist equivalent (*chair*) rather matter-of-factly.

   E. Do not laugh when someone tells a dirty joke or makes a sexist remark. Move on expeditiously, ignoring what was said. Decide later whether you need to discuss the matter privately with the offending person.

2. If certain group members do not talk, ask questions to find out what they are thinking; or divide the group into sub-groups so that people can talk more freely.

3. Do not assume that silence means agreement. Call for a vote or check with each person individually to determine whether you actually have consensus.

4. Thank a dominating person for his or her contributions and firmly exercise your authority as leader to call on others. Do not let the dominating speaker contribute again until others have spoken. If you know ahead of time that one or two people are likely to dominate conversation, set forth ground rules at the very beginning to decrease the chances of anyone taking over.

5. If the group ignores certain speakers, clearly focus attention on them. For example, you can say, "...has an interesting idea. I want to hear more about it."

6. Provide both praise and constructive criticism for group members as appropriate and encourage them to do so for one another.

7. Encourage appropriate use of humor from all group members. Avoid letting the group depend on one person for its comic relief.

8. If someone interrupts or starts to answer a question addressed to another member, intervene with "I think that question was directed to.... Let's hear from her first. Then we'll come back to...."

9. Make sure that tasks are assigned on some basis other than sex (e.g., each group member takes his or her turn at taking notes or bringing refreshments).

10. If some people in your group are very reluctant to talk, consider using a nominal group process instead of brainstorming for generating ideas. In a nominal group, members work in a unit but do not verbally interact with each other. Instead, they write their responses. (See Resources at end)

11. Challenge self-deprecating remarks. (For example, in response to "This can't possibly be right" say, "I bet your next month's salary that you're right on target.")

12. If a group member does not state his or her position strongly and clearly, provide encouragement. (You can say, for example, "I bet you have other reasons for suggesting this program. Will you share them with us, please?")

13. Decide what you believe is an appropriate level of self-disclosure for your group and support group members in conforming to that norm. Consider the following: "Perhaps some of you have heard that John's daughter almost drowned last week. Before we start the meeting, would you be willing to tell the group what happened?"

14. Maintain eye contact with other group members, especially when they are speaking.

15. Encourage women and men to sit next to one another rather than to segregate themselves by sex.

16. Don't allow any single group member to dominate the most desirable spaces. (Consider this: "Kevin has been sitting at the head of the table for the past two meetings. It's time for someone else to have that opportunity....")

17. Familiarize yourself with the research on gender dynamics in communication and share this information with your group at the appropriate time. (When a behavior is clearly apparent in your group, point out, for example, that women are smiling much more than men or that men are talking about topics that most of the women are not interested in.)

18. Select items from the resources listed in the back of this pamphlet and share them with your group.

19. When your group changes its behavior to be more inclusive, acknowledge change and its effects. Reward your group either verbally or, if appropriate, with tangible rewards for improved performance.

20. Remember that neither you nor your group is perfect. If you slip, allow group members to call you on your behavior without being defensive. Always keep in mind that your modeling the behavior you want from group members is your strongest, most effective teaching device.

These suggestions are ones that you can do publicly within the group. Not all situations can be handled that openly, however. If the behavior of some persons continues to interfere with the group, you may need to speak privately with them about their behavior. Perhaps just a quick comment after a meeting would suffice (e.g., "Your analysis of the problem was very helpful; I wish you'd do that more often.") In other instances, you may need a more extensive private discussion to either encourage more active participation or to state your expectations for respecting the participation of others. You need not conduct a counseling session, but a private discussion can be helpful when a public statement is either inappropriate or ineffective.

Here are some situations in which you might want to talk to group members privately. For each one, decide what you would say or do within and outside the group. If you like, check your suggestions with the sample responses that follow.

John Neelan, curriculum supervisor, continues to dominate conversations and interrupts others unless you intervene. Group members express their irritation by avoiding eye contact or ignoring what Neelan says. He, however, seems oblivious to the effects of his behavior. What do you do?

Librarian Sue Kwak has recently joined your group. She is very quiet; and when she does talk, she speaks very softly and slowly. Your group is very energetic and outgoing, and you find that members frequently seem impatient with Kwak's deliberate speech and moments of silence. You suspect some cultural differences might be operating. What do you do?

Kevin Allen, head football coach, persists in touching others. Some of the members of your group are bothered by it; others aren't. Although you believe that Allen's intentions are innocuous, others are suspicious. What do you do?

Phillip Freedman, English teacher and freelance writer, must hold the world's record for the number of puns that one human being can come up with in any 15 minute period. And nine out of ten are so funny that everyone in your group laughs. As group leader, you try to ignore Freedman after the first two or three puns, but he's so funny that even you have a difficult time not laughing. What do you do?

Your group consists of seven teachers: five men and two women. You notice that the men dominate conversation. It is fast-paced with few pauses, there's lots of humor, and the men interrupt and answer questions addressed to the women. These women have good ideas that the group needs to hear, but you notice that it seems difficult for them to get into the discussion. What do you do?

The women in your group simply do not like Connie Compton who heads up the district's computer operations. Compton is a physically large woman whose appearance and behavior often intimidate others. Her unkempt appearance and skill in swearing are as well known as her ability to get a job done. Buddy-buddy with the men in your group, especially the old-timers, Compton tends to ignore the other women, especially those who aren't particularly assertive. Two of these women are threatening to resign unless you take Compton off the committee. What do you do?

If you want to check your ideas, here are some sample responses for each situation.

Talk to Neelan privately, affirming the value of his contribution *and* your concern that others need to have their fair share of discussion time. Provide examples for how important that is to the group's productivity. If Neelan feels strongly that he simply has to talk, offer to give him five minutes of your time after the meeting to hear whatever else he has to say.

Avoid casting this problem as totally belonging to Kwak. You may need to brief her on the norms of your group: talkative, assertive and task oriented. At the same time, you may need to talk with your group about cultural differences. An increased awareness can lead to greater understanding and acceptance for both Kwak and your group. Another option is for you to slow down the group to provide some openings for Kwak. Here's an example: "I don't think Sue was finished, John. Would you like to add more, Sue?"

Allen needs to understand how in the work place women and men often perceive touching very differently. Although men may see their touching as friendly and innocuous, women may see sexual implications. One possible strategy is to talk briefly with Allen to let him know that some people are uncomfortable with his touching and that it is negatively affecting his status in the group. You can also encourage those who are bothered by his behavior to speak to Allen directly. What's most important is that the group's functioning not be hindered by either inappropriate behavior *or* the perception of such behavior.

You need to put Freedman's behavior in perspective. Just as you have an obligation not to let any group member dominate conversation, you also should not let anyone control the humor. Explain to Freedman that his humor, although valuable, is excessive, too much of a good thing. It slows down the task and conversation and does not give others the opportunity to enliven the conversation. Make sure that Freedman understands that he needs to be more selective in his humor and provide him with positive feedback when he is.

This incident is fairly typical of groups. Men tend to talk in a competitive manner while women's preference is to take turns. Thus, in a mixed gender group men's style is likely to prevail. As group leader, you can control this by slowing the pace and soliciting comments and questions from the women. Once they have established themselves, then they are more likely to be seen as an integral part of the group and will more naturally be active participants in the conversation. If one or two men persist in attempting to dominate or if one or two women neglect to speak up, you may need to speak with them privately.

You can opt for insight, behavioral change or both. In the first instance, both Compton and the others in the group need to understand how cultural norms (established over the years by the male administrators) have affected women like Compton who have come up through the ranks. Here is a good example of how sex role orientation, the more "masculine" female, has been affected by and now affects others - women and men. To convey this information, you may need to talk with Compton and the others separately and privately. One strategy Compton might respond positively to is the opportunity she has for supporting mid-level women in their career development.

If increasing self-insight won't work, then focus your energies on specific behaviors, e.g., intimidation. Explain to Compton that her aggressiveness is negatively affecting the group's morale and productivity to the extent that some members are considering resigning. At the same time talk with the other women about not letting another person intimidate them so easily. Be very specific in what you ask each person to do or not do and then provide feedback. If, however, neither of these approaches is effective, then you may need to structure group tasks in a way to let Compton do what she's best at outside the group meeting while limiting her involvement in the group.

This last suggestion for Compton leads us to a disclaimer. There are some people–either men or women–who because of personality type and individual work style simply do not function well in a group setting. They do their best work independently and alone. For these people, don't try a force fit. Instead, find ways to involve them in the task but not necessarily the group. They will be happier and more productive as will your group.

Two final suggestions: If you have the time, have someone conduct training for your group on effective communication between women and men in work groups. Such training is available without charge for public school educators in Delaware, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia and the District of Columbia from the Mid-Atlantic Center for Sex Equity. The center's address is 5010 Wisconsin Avenue, N.W., Suite 310, Washington, D.C. 20016. Telephone: (202) 885-8536.

If you don't have time available, there are several resources that can assist you and your group on improving the quality and quantity of your work. A listing of those follows.

Here is a selected listing of resources in three areas:

research on sex differences in communications

curriculum materials on sex differences in communication for students from upper elementary through college

group process and development literature which focuses on making groups function more effectively.

Eakins, Barbara Westbrook and Eakins, R. Gene. Sex Differences in Human Communication. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978.

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For Elementary and Junior High

Massialas, Dr. Byron G., project director. "Decisions about Language," Teacher's and Student's Guides in Fair Play: Developing Self-Concept and Decision-Making Skills in the Middle School. Newton, Massachusetts: WEEA Publishing Center, n.d.

For Secondary and Post Secondary

Nelson, Dr. Alleen Pace, project director. "Changing Words in a Changing World." Newton, Massachusetts: WEEA Publishing Center, n.d.

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